DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 275 FL 020 045

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TITLE The Problem of Norm in the Study of Cross-Cultural Discourse.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 15p.; In: Communication and Discourse across Cultures and Languages. AFinLa Yearbook 1991; see FL 020 041.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; *Contrastive Linguistics; Conversational Language Courses; *Discourse Analysis; English (Second Language); Finnish; Foreign Countries; *Intercultural Communication; Interpersonal Competence; *Language Usage; Norms; *Oral Language; *Second Language Learning; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS Finland

ABSTRACT

Experiences with the data, analysis, and results in the Finnish Contrastive Discourse Analysis Project (1985-1988) at the University of Oulu are reported. The purpose of the project was to describe the conversational skills of advanced Finnish speakers of English, and especially to determine the level of their social competence or their ability to use certain discourse strategies and/or politeness strategies. The most difficult aspect of the project was to determine the extent to which the differences in the language of advanced Finnish speakers of English were due to deficiencies in their linguistic skills and the degree to which they arose from different assumptions on the nature of conversational interaction in English and Finnish cultures. It was concluded that both framing and symbolizing strategies must be compared before definitive answers can be found regarding the level of social competence of the Finnish students. Some of the features of the interlanguage conversational style were found to result from cultural differences and culture-specific norms, but others were traced to deficiencies in the linguistic or structural skills of the students, particularly in the idiomatic control of the target language. Further research on the topic continues in the University of Oulu's Lexis in Discourse Project. Contains 9 references. (LB)

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THE PROBLEM OF NORM IN THE STUDY OF CROSS-CULTURAL DISCOURSE

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Introduction

In my paper I report some of the experiences we have had with the data, analysis and results in the *Contrastive Discourse Analysis Project* (1985-1988) carried out in the Department of English in Oulu under Professor Heikki Nyyssönen. The project mainly involved two researchers, myself and Pirkko Raudaskoski. As a direct continuation of our project there is at the moment a new one, *Lexis in Discourse*, under way in our Department.

Our purpose was to describe the conversational skills of advanced Finnish speakers of English, and especially to find out the level of their *social competence*, ie. their ability to use certain *discourse strategies* and/or *politeness strategies*.

In the following I will first briefly present our way of collecting data as well as our framework for analyzing it. Secondly, I will call attention to the issue of norm in cross-cultural studies such as ours. All through the project one of the trickiest questions was to what extent the differences in the language of advanced Finnish speakers of English were due to deficiencies in their linguistic skills, and to what degree they could be seen to arise from different assumptions on the nature of conversational interaction in the two cultures, Finnish and English. In other words, were the students at a given (failure) point acting in accordance with an interlanguage norm, so that they resorted to the Finnish language system (which in turn is conditioned by the Finnish cultural system) in the formulation of a message in English, or were they obeying some conversational norm prevalent in the Finnish rather than the target language culture? Even though it is frequently possible only to make guesses, this question is an important one in the actual explanation of features of the students' talk. In addition, what are the native speaker norms that hold in

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conversational interaction? It is possible to distinguish two levels of such norms, framing and symbolizing, and look at the students' performance at these two levels.

But first, let us look at the way we collected our data and how we set about to analyze it.

Collection and transcription of data (field methods)

Originally, we took for a model the project conducted in Bochum University in West Germany by Willis Edmondson and his associates (Juliane House, Gabriele Kasper and Brigitte Stemmer) in 1976-1981, concerning communicative competence as a learning objective in foreign language teaching. Our empirical design follows their approach in broad outline: our corpus consists of simulated task-oriented conversations between a Finnish advanced university student of English (X = NNS) and a native speaker of English (Y = NS). These conversations always involve a problem that has to be solved in the course of the interaction, that is, (mainly) the student's social competence was put to the test in some way. The collection of material was based on four *interactional bases*:

Base 1: X wants Y do A, where A is a future act and is not in Y's interest (cf. inviting the hearer, reminding the hearer of something)

Base 2: X does A, where A is mainly in the interest of Y (cf. offering to do s-g)

Base 3: Y did/does/will do A, A inconvenient for/not acceptable to X (cf. complaining, criticizing the hearer)

Base 4: X did/does/will do A, A inconvenient for/not acceptable to Y (cf. admitting one's guilt and responsibility)

These four types were then varied according to the status or power (+P/-P) and the social distance (+D/-D) between participants: we thus have (1) asymmetrical +P+D situations, where NS has the higher relative status of the two and the speakers do not know each other (at least not very well), (2) symmetrical -P+D situations, where the speakers are equal in terms of power but do not know each other, and (3) symmetrical -P-D situations, where they are equal and also good friends. This gave us 12 situations, with four versions recorded of each

situation. Thus, we had a total of 48 conversations, which amounted to approximately 7 hours and some 75 000 words. Additionally, a number of Finnish-Finnish and English-English recordings were made for comparison.

In the actual recording situation the participants were left on their own, so that the analysts were not listening to the interaction or observing it in any way. This had the desired effect: the participants on the whole regarded these conversations as natural and none of them wanted their contribution to be discounted (this was expressed by them in a questionnaire asking, among others, what their view was on the naturalness of the language used by both parties). We of course admit that video recordings would have given us much more information on such interactions, but at the time we felt that their naturalness was more important and we settled for audiotaped ones.

Our transcription conventions represent mainly the words spoken, plus some other relevant features such as pauses, overlapping speech, inaudible speech, contrastive emphasis, etc.:

n	= pause
[ ]	= overlapping speech
(inaudible)	= inaudible speech
(( ))	= hardly audible speech
underlining	= stressed words (contrastive stress or emphasis)

The same type of simulations were later used as data in two other projects in our department: the project on the English used by engineers in three industrial companies (Kemira, Nokia, Veitsiluoto), and the project on the need of Finnish graduate engineers for further education in English (financed by the Finnish Engineering Society).

Analytical framework

Our analytical framework was formed and revised over a long period of time, as it became clear to us that certain features could not be studied in isolation. We were thus forced to gradually expand our original plan, which was to study only the FTA, or face-threatening act, environments, ie. those parts of each discourse that contained the student's invitation, complaint, etc., plus the immediate environment, especially that preceding the core FTA. Thus, we did

not originally plan to study what could be called the overall tones of the conversations, that is, what the orientation of the speakers was towards each other in those situations. However, we were forced to take this aspect into account (which of course made the analysis even more difficult!), and to such an extent that it almost became the most important level of analysis in the end.

In the analysis of our cross-cultural encounters we combined elements of two earlier approaches to conversational strategy, namely the model of Edmondson and House on spoken discourse (1981) and the framework of Brown and Levinson on universal politeness strategies (1978) (see Kärkkäinen and Raudaskoski 1989 for more details on our analysis and for the results we obtained). We identified strategic elements at three different structural levels: (1) the level of the *whole encounter*, (2) the sequence or *conversational phase* during which the main imposition (eg. complaint, request, invitation) is made, consisting of *conversational moves*, and (3) the level of *individual turns*.

Native vs. non-native conversational norms

If the native speakers constitute the norm in the study of cross-cultural discourse and we compare the performance of Finnish students to the way in which native speakers of English behave in similar situations (and this is what we did), we can perhaps distinguish two main types of native-speaker norms relevant for discourse (Nyyssönen 1990, following Loveday 1982): *framing and symbolizing norms*. In what follows, I will examine the manifestations of framing norms at primarily the first two of our original analytical levels, ie. the level of the whole encounter and that of the conversational phases and moves, and relate the notion of symbolizing to the level of individual turns. It needs to be pointed out, though, that it is possible to distinguish these two types of culture-bound norms or discourse strategies only at a theoretical level, because in practice they work in unison and modify each other. Also, these strategies are context-dependent, so that how and to what degree they are obeyed depends on who you are talking to, what is being talked about, what the situation is, etc.

On the whole our students were considered to be very proficient and fluent by three outside NS informants. On closer analysis, however, there were points in the conversations where their performance differed from that of native speakers:

the student made a social blunder of some kind, causing momentary discomfort to the hearer. According to Jenny Thomas, these trouble spots in communication can be called *pragmatic failures* (Thomas 1983:91). There were of course differences among our students, so that in Group A, ie. in the best group according to structural competence, there were hardly any instances of failures of this kind, while in Group B these were much more common, and in Group C both pragmatic failures and structural problems were much more in evidence. On the other hand, native speakers of English in our corpus represented not only one set of norms but several, obviously differing sets, because they came from countries and cultures as far apart as Great Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Below, I will present some of the most frequent types of pragmatic failures that recurred in the language used by Finnish learners of English, and pose the following question: do the differences observed reflect an underlying set of Finnish conversational norms that differ from the norms prevailing in the target culture, in which case we should talk about the *Finnish norm* vs. the *NS norm*, or are the differences more likely to be due to the deficient linguistic competence of the Finnish learners of English, so that they rely on the Finnish language system rather than that of the target language, in which case we are dealing with an *interlanguage norm* (or dilemma) vs. a *NS norm*? It is almost impossible to answer this question with any certainty, but I will suggest some possible answers that were arrived at in the course of the project.

Framing norms

Framing norms refer to culture-dependent discourse-structuring principles on the appropriateness of topic, the proper introduction of topic, and the suitability of speech acts, functions or attitudes. They also have to do with the quantity of speech, and how speech is to be distributed, chunked, sequenced, etc. (Nyyssönen 1990:16).

A violation of the relevant framing norm results in a *sociopragmatic failure* (as one type of pragmatic failure). According to Thomas (1983:99), sociopragmatic failure originates in "cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour". In second-language teaching, these norms

should be talked about rather than taught - it is indeed debatable whether they can be taught in any systematic way.

A. Let us first look at the *level of the whole encounter*, at which notions such as the overall tone of the conversation and the orientation of speaker and hearer towards each other (what is their interpretation of the situation, how well they understand each other, etc.) were at the centre of attention. The overall NS norm here could be expressed roughly as 'Show involvement and positive affect'. The degree of involvement and interest shown by speakers towards each other in the course of the conversations may have, among others, the following linguistic manifestations (cf. also Kärkkäinen and Raudaskoski 1988 and Räinä 1990):

(a) Native speakers of English generally express and even exaggerate the degree of empathy, friendliness and interest that they show towards their interlocutors, ie. they engage in expressions of *positive* or *solidarity politeness* in order to create and maintain some degree of convergence and common ground. In other words, they use language that is normally used between intimates to create an overall tone of co-operativeness and hearer-supportiveness. Such behaviour is really the NS norm in everyday conversations such as our simulated ones; speakers tend to use expressions that stress in-group membership, convey that the hearer is admirable and interesting, agree with the other if possible, etc. (Brown and Levinson 1978). Even though this is a universal principle, it is not necessarily valued in the same way in different cultures. On the basis of our data we claim that it tends to be more highly valued in the English than in the Finnish cultural context: in the talk of our Finnish speakers these expressions were often noticeably absent or their tone was relatively unemphatic. This was the case even in symmetrical -P-D situations (between two "good friends"), which was commonly interpreted by our NS informants as a general lack of reassurance and lack of interest towards the other person. It is possible to hypothesize, and this seems to be a point widely accepted by Finns themselves, that in the Finnish cultural context this particular kind of overt marking of involvement is not exceedingly common. We tend to avoid especially personal expressions of camaraderie, such as taking explicit notice of or showing interest in the hearer's person, let alone exaggerating or intensifying our interest in him/her. That is, the Finnish norm and the native speaker norm differ at this point. Another explanation, even though perhaps a less likely one, is that the Finnish learners

do not know the possible idiomatic ways in English of showing solidarity or rapport with the addressee, and, consequently, do not show it. In this case we would be dealing with an interlanguage dilemma rather than a Finnish norm. And, lastly, this is perhaps a point where the fact that we used simulations rather than authentic data may play a role; the students do not feel that this is a sufficiently "real" situation to show genuine concern for their interlocutors and for the matter at hand, and it is quite possible that they feel emotionally inhibited to display such behaviour.

(b) Involvement can be manifested in the type and amount of *backchannel behaviour*, too. Finnish students generally gave a great deal of backchannel feedback. However, there were some problems involved. The backchannel that they gave was often of a minimal kind, unemphatic and also not very emphathetic in content (*yeah, mhm, that's right*). In this way the students appeared to avoid taking speaking turns. When more emphatic feedback would have been called for, the students were seldom able to produce it. Related with this, they had problems with synchrony: they were often not able to pick up the ball and acknowledge something that the other person had said. Compare the following examples where a more emphatic substitute for the original item is given in italics (Räinä 1990:18):

Example 1:

Y: We - at <u>that</u> time they [teachers in Scotland] were still using the <u>belt</u>.
X: Yeah, yeah. /NS: *The belt!? You can't be serious.*
Y: They've stopped it now, but - I didn't - I wasn't able to use it but...
X: Yeah. /NS: *Well, I can't blame you.*

Y: So how do you like the weather? It's pretty nice for San Francisco, isn't it?
X: Yeeah. Nothing to complain about. /NS: *Oh yes, it's lovely/absolutely great!* (or was X trying to find the English equivalent for the Finnish 'eipä hassumpi/ei voi valittaa'?)

Y: I've got a lot of friends around here. I can introduce you to them.
X: Yeah. /NS: *Could you? That'd be very nice/I'd like that very much.*

It appears to be a NS norm to display emphatic reactions, eg. use 'supremes' and informal idiomatic expressions when giving feedback (Räinä 1990: 19). By contrast, it appears to be a Finnish norm that extravagance in speech is to be avoided, and language is used in a serious manner, saying only what is literally

meant. This would explain the unemphatic and minimal feedback prevalent in the speech of our students. However, another explanation may again be the fact that "feedback behaviour", as well as many other conversational routines and strategies, have not yet been systematically introduced into teaching syllabuses even at the university level, while acquiring (without being taught) the idiomaticity in this area is perhaps only possible during a lengthy stay in the cultural environment of the target language (only students in Group A fulfilled this criterion).

(c) Shared orientation can also be expressed by *distribution of talk* and *topic control*. A well-known NS norm is of course that silences should be filled with talk, while an equally well-known stereotypical Finnish norm is that silence is perfectly acceptable. The NSs in our corpus were on the whole much more active as participants, so that they almost always spoke more than the students (in 38 out of 48 conversations) and ended up controlling the talk and introducing new topics. They therefore seemed more involved in the actual situation, and more willing to take on the maintenance of the conversation. The above perhaps primarily reflects the Finnish norm, but it would seem possible that it also reflects an interlanguage dilemma in that a native speaker "automatically" has the upper hand, by virtue of being a native speaker, in a cross-cultural encounter, especially if the second language speaker is not very proficient in terms of grammar or vocabulary (or idiomaticity). Thus, he/she very quickly gives up the floor and is only content to follow the direction that the conversation assumes, without actively influencing it him/herself.

(d) Solidarity is further manifestated in the number and type of *questions* asked. On the whole, Finns asked few questions (or produced utterances that clearly expected an answer): in 12 conversations that we studied very carefully the numbers were 59 for students and 237 for native speakers. Besides, the grammatical form of the students' questions was very traditional (do/have, inversion etc.). This can be a reflection of the Finnish language system, where questions are rarely formed by a direct word order and rising intonation or by a direct word order and a tag ("You must be one of the new Finnish girls, yes"?). On the other hand, however, the function of the questions was also different: very often they were used only to ask for information, while NSs used the type that means "Am I right in supposing that...?", "Don't you agree?", "Why don't we...?", thus working for the success of the conversation (Räinä

1990:13-14). Our informants pointed out that making a suggestion in the form of a question is usually also more polite.

B. If we then turn to the *level of conversational phase*, a NS framing norm seems to be that you should engage, together with your interlocutor, in *creating an interactional sequence*, a dialogue, rather than a non-interactional monologue. The latter pattern was often favoured by our students. The native-speaker pattern results in a completely different way of introducing an issue or an imposition in conversation, not a lecture but a joint creation by two speakers. Compare the following offer of help made by a very proficient Finnish student:

Example 2:

Preparatory move(s)
X: Hello I'm sorry to disturb you but I happened to overhear your conversation with your friend a moment ago,
FTA
and I thought I might help you
Supportive move(s)
because I know some Swedish, and I thought I could help you - you with the translation.

with a NS-NS version of the same situation:

X: Hi. nn What are you up to there?
Y: (explains)
X: Are you having difficulties with something? n I - I noticed you talking with your friend and you seemed to - to give a big sigh.

(long stretch of dialogue)

X: I er - I actually speak French because I come from a sp - a French-speaking area n in Canada.
Y: Oh you do?
X: Yeah n but er...
Y: Aah...
X: ... and you need some help with n [translating?
Y: Just - just] translating. Yeah. You (wouldn't) - would you be interested?
X: Well, it's beginning of the term and I don't have very much to do. [...]

A NS informant's comment on the first version was that a native speaker would have stopped to wait for some kind of reaction from Y. A more general comment on X's behaviour by the same informant was that X keeps rambling, and the way she adds on information is not "idiomatic" but gives the impression

that X is nervous. This comment at least implicitly captures the lack of reciprocity very often found in the talk of Finns. Admittedly, in a cross-cultural encounter many situational factors cause a great deal of stress to the non-native speaker, and the language learner has to focus on getting his/her message across. But a certain inability or reluctance to subject one's views to criticism, let alone to develop one's views in and through the process of exchanging ideas with other people, seems almost to be the "norm" in Finland.

C. Finally, at the *level of the conversational move*, there are differences between NSs and NNSs in the way an FTA is brought up and, relatedly, in the amount of supportive work (ie. preparatory and supportive moves, cf. Edmondson and House 1981) done in connection with the FTA. A native speaker norm seems to be to produce *a speech act set*, so that the FTA is expressed several times in maybe slightly different terms (what could be called the multiple head phenomenon in discourse, cf. Edmondson and House 1981), while the interlanguage/Finnish norm is to reduce the FTA to a solitary speech act. In the NS-NNS version of Example 2, the FTA of offer, besides being packed into one utterance or conversational move together with some preparatory and some supportive work (X apologizes and gives a reason why she made the offer), only comes up at this one point in conversation.

A general finding was that not enough supportive work, such as giving reasons or extra information after the FTA, was done by the students. For example, an expression of thanks (Thank you so much) is in native-speaker speech almost always followed up by other accompanying elements such as 'complimenting' (You're wonderful) and 'reassuring' (Just what I wanted/And blue's my favorite colour) (Nyyssönen 1990:20). Furthermore, the supportive moves made by the students were neutral and noncommittal in tone. This aspect of the students' behaviour is in line with the finding above, namely that they neglected the marking of involvement and positive affect.

Symbolizing norms

Symbolizing norms, which are also culture-dependent, specify "the channels of communication and the expressive means judged appropriate to convey a message, function or attitude" (Nyyssönen 1990:16). They thus refer to how a

speech act, in our case the FTA, should be properly expressed, verbally or non-verbally.

A *pragmalinguistic failure* results from a violation of the relevant symbolizing norm. Jenny Thomas claims that this type of failure "occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by the speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2" (Thomas 1983:99). This type of failure is basically a linguistic problem which can be attended to fairly easily in second-language teaching.

At the *level of individual speaking turns*, how a given speech act is expressed by native speakers is very often routinized and idiomatic in its pragmatic marking. Native speakers also know the proper amount of pragmatic marking of politeness, for example, so that there is not too little or too much of it for the situation. By contrast, compare the above offer of help by X. It is very tentative and also very formal (*I thought, might* are used as mitigating devices), perhaps too much so in a conversation between two students. On the other hand it is quite on-the-record as an offer: it makes a very direct reference to "helping you", which can in fact make it hard for Y not to accept this offer if he should want to do so. It is possible that two native speakers who do not know each other beforehand, even though both students would try to avoid an on-the-record offer by directing the conversation around it in some way, for example, towards a request for help from the "receiving" party. Even this can be answered by what is still an off-the-record offer, as in the example above: *Well, it's beginning of the term and I don't have very much to do.* In the offer made by the Finnish student, the slight unidiomaticity of pragmatic marking may also contribute to its direct effect: *might* (at least in my opinion) sounds a little strange and almost too casual in this context, as if X meant to convey something like "I haven't got anything better to do, so I might as well help you". This is clearly unintentional, since X does not attempt to create a more casual atmosphere at other points in the conversation.

More generally, in -P-D situations, where the participants are good (simulated) friends, and where therefore casual and jocular language would be the norm, Finns were not able to join in but were as a rule more matter-of-fact. As for the FTA in these situations, students seemed to regard the imposition involved as

so high that they often resorted to formal and tentative style in presenting it. When inviting the other person or reminding him/her of something, it seemed difficult for students to be polite without being almost too tentative, ie. there was excessive pragmatic marking (cf. to a student friend: *I was wondering if it could be possible for you to n give it [= a small amount of money] back to me or at least some of it*). On the other hand the students had trouble using informal language without sounding almost insulting, i.e. there was inadequate pragmatic marking (cf. in a +P+D situation X's boss has just admitted that she does not remember that a particular problem to do with X's wages had been talked about a couple of days ago, to which X says: *Yes I thought you wouldn't ha ha*. Also, in a -P+D situation X has agreed to translate an article to Y, a student in the same dormitory, and Y says that she is willing to pay for it, to which X says: *How much ((laughs))*?) In a -P+D situation, which is a symmetrical constellation, students likewise tended to present the FTA in a very formal way. This possibly reflects a cultural difference in the weighting of impositions: in Finland impositions seem to be perceived as higher than in the target-language culture. Lastly and not surprisingly, in the +P+D situations, where the students are in a lower or less dominant position, they experience the power difference as very great and use formal and tentative style.

The idiomaticity of pragmatic marking is of course a very subtle thing; learners were often on the verge of saying the right thing but then something went slightly wrong and the utterance came out in not quite the idiomatic form. Inconsistency in the choice of strategy was indeed a recurring phenomenon in the interlanguage of Finnish university students, and it is a result, apart from differing judgments on the conversational norms relevant for the particular context, also of deficiencies in their idiomatic control of English.

Conclusion

It is obvious (and became obvious to us quite early on in the project) that we must compare both types of strategies, framing and symbolizing, before we can say anything definite about the level of social competence of our students. Some of the features of the interlanguage conversational style can be seen to result from cultural differences and culture-specific norms; at the level of framing norms there is evidence, for example, that a deference system is prevalent in the

Finnish culture, as opposed to the solidarity system prevalent in the target language culture. On the other hand, some of the features of the learner style can quite clearly be traced back to deficiencies in the "purely" linguistic or structural skills of the students, and more especially in the idiomatic control of the target language. In many cases, however, no one clear explanation can be found.

Another reason why Finnish students of English fail to contribute "fully" to the interaction may be that they are not always able (or less able than NSs) to relate the framing and symbolizing norms to the situational context, ie. to the stage of the ongoing discourse, to the topic and the setting, to the participant roles and relations, etc. Even though they master the relevant strategies of the target culture at some theoretical level, the situational constraints may prevent them from applying this knowledge, and they resort to the Finnish practices instead.

As analysts our own cultural frame seemed to escape us, so that it often became impossible to make any cultural claims or generalizations any more, certainly not any other than preliminary ones. This problem was most acute at the level of framing norms; until recently there has been a tendency to understate the significance of differences in this area, and, consequently, not much research, cultural or cross-cultural, has been done so far. At the same time, differences in the area of symbolizing norms have perhaps been too much at the centre of attention in recent pragmatic analyses, and their significance can indeed easily be overstated (cf. Nyyssönen 1990:23). It often makes no sense to compare one solitary speech act cross-culturally, without any reference to the context in which it occurs, the overall situational tone, etc. The symbolizing norms therefore did not gain equal importance in the treatment above.

In conclusion, what we wanted to achieve in the Contrastive Discourse Analysis Project was to make ourselves and others more aware of the possible differences in the communicative styles of Finns and native speakers of English, ie. to acquire contrastive information and to increase cross-cultural awareness. In the *Lexis in Discourse* Project mentioned at the beginning of this paper, idiomaticity is the central point of interest. The pragmatic marking of a speech act is closely linked with the idiomatic structure of a given language. The idiomatic control of English could be enhanced by transferring the focus in teaching, at a suitable stage, more clearly to the idiomatic lexical patterning in the target language and

to the ways in which this patterning is made use of for communicative and strategic purposes, in naturally-occurring and ongoing discourse.

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